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ABSTRACT

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education, through its Research Institute of Assistive and Training Technologies (RIATT@NASDSE), has developed a planned approach to professional development in the area of assistive technology using distance education. This award-winning distance education program offers convenient, inexpensive training to professionals using multimedia materials at home. The program comprises 15 four-week long courses in which participants use multimedia materials and e-mail to complete their assignments and participate in class discussions. Participants may earn continuing education units and can work toward competency certificates in specific areas of assistive technology. Several universities accept RIATT@NASDSE courses for graduate and undergraduate credit. The program has been implemented successfully in several states, which report the following positive outcomes: renewed statewide enthusiasm, access to training by all rural professionals, enhanced communication among districts, increased participation at conferences, a common knowledge base, and satisfaction of related parental concerns. Brief profiles explain how the RIATT@NASDSE program has been used to enhance professional development in Kansas, Indiana, Maine, Ohio, Idaho, Alabama, New Mexico, and New York. (SV)

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CONVENIENT DISTANCE EDUCATION TRAINING IN TECHNOLOGY

It is well known that rural districts have traditionally found it difficult to provide professional development to their education professionals. In many cases, the cost of school release time, travel, and increased burden on the participant have limited rural-based training to 1-2 day inservices at best. Distance Education programs can be a cost effective and efficient way to train large numbers of these professionals. A major concern, however, is the selection of good distance education programs. The true instructional design professional knows that developing quality distance education programs is time consuming, expensive and takes professionals with skills in multimedia development. Most of us have participated in a variety of poorly developed distance delivery models during the past several decades. These programs, which give distance education a black eye, are still in abundance. Excellent programs such as the Transition Training Program developed by Philip Browning and Karen Rabren at Auburn University offers states, regional organizations and school districts the opportunity to provide professional development programs on a statewide basis.

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education, through their Research Institute of Assistive and Training Technologies (RIATT@NASDSE), has developed the capacity to help states and local organizations provide a planned approach to professional development in the area of assistive technology using distance education. This award winning distance education program offers convenient, inexpensive training to professionals using a multimedia based distance education model that can be completed entirely from one's home. The multimedia aspect of this program means that participants can gain information regarding best practices in assistive technology through a series of anchored instruction that includes, videos, textbooks, article reprints, CD-ROMs, floppy disks and hands on kits.

The RIATT@NASDSE program utilizes 15 different 4-week long courses in which participants use their multimedia materials and electronic mail to complete their assignments and participate in class discussions. The strength of the program comes from the fact that the 15 courses are offered every other month, affording maximum flexibility to participants in statewide programs to sign up and complete their training. Because each course is designed to be completed in a self-paced format, the participant can schedule their learning time in a way that best meets their schedule within the 4-week period that the course is running. To participate, all one needs is access to a television with a VCR, computer with CD-ROM, and electronic mail. As a part of the program, participants earn CEUs and can work toward Competency Certificates in specific areas of assistive technology, including a Basic Competency Certificate (recommended by NASDSE) as well as Professional Certificates in the areas of Severe / Profound, Communication, General Classroom Teaching, Occupational and Rehabilitation Therapy, Paraprofessionals, Early Childhood, Administration and School Psychology. The Basic Competency Certificate, obtained by taking 6 specific courses, provides the necessary minimal competencies required to provide the assistive technology services as mandated by IDEA. Several universities throughout the country also accept the RIATT@NASDSE courses as graduate and undergraduate credit. One university in particular (Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS) offers a distance education masters degree with an emphasis in assistive technology using the RIATT@NASDSE coursework.

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To date, the RIATT@NASDSE program in assistive technology has been successfully implemented in several states and is expanding to include many more in the near future. These states report several positive outcomes as a result of utilizing this distance education program which include:

- Renewed statewide enthusiasm as professionals learn together and trade ideas
- Access to training by all rural-based professionals
- Enhanced communication between districts (IEP exchange is easy to understand since all use the same approach and language)
- Increased participation at conferences due to a common knowledge and interest
- Increased effectiveness of current state training practices due to a common knowledge-base
- Satisfaction of parental concerns regarding competency of assistive technology services
- Development of an educational workforce abreast of the assistive technology mandates of IDEA 97
- Participation of professionals who never had the opportunity of release time or finances to participate in centrally located training programs

There are challenges, however, in planning and implementing an effective statewide training program utilizing the RIATT@NASDSE distance education program. Frequently, assistive technology training programs already exist through regional, university, or other local efforts. The RIATT@NASDSE program must be coordinated with these existing programs in such a way that the expertise already available within the state are fully utilized. In this way, the RIATT@NASDSE program builds upon existing programs and serves to address any areas in which gaps in training may exist.

In addition, some professionals are fearful that distance education can not incur the same type of learning (i.e., hands-on or application) that the more traditional, face-to-face approach to instruction does. Indeed, while this may be true for the many types of "talking head" videos that are passed off as distance education today, the RIATT@NASDSE program has been shown to do quite the opposite. For instance, unlike most university training programs that are built by 1-2 professors within the faculty, the RIATT@NASDSE program was designed by a team of instructional designers, multimedia experts, content experts and instructors. The resulting multimedia training program is much more comprehensive in its coverage of material, variety of assignments, and interest to participants.

Regardless of these difficulties, several organizations have risen to the occasion by implementing statewide training programs that have met or exceeded their expectations. What follows are just a few examples of how some states have used the RIATT@NASDSE distance education program in assistive technology to enhance their professional development capacity. Explanations of each state program were provided by the Project Coordinators.

Kansas (State Director: Carol Dermyer, Project Coordinator: Pamela Cress)

The Kansas goal was (and is) to increase the capacity of our state to provide assistive technology services to individuals with disabilities. We identified 15 leadership personnel through a competitive process and provided scholarships for them to become trainers. Funding for these scholarships was obtained from our state's Tech Act grant, the State Department of Education and Vocational Rehabilitation, the State Agency for Developmental Disabilities/Mental Retardation, the state Part C program and other sources.

The 15 trainers are now training others and will have trained 168 Kansans in 892 RIATT@NASDSE Assistive Technology courses by the end of Spring 1999. Recently, Fort Hays State University, using trainers approved by both the University and by RIATT@NASDSE, have begun to offer coursework and a masters degree with an emphasis in assistive technology completely through distance education (http://fhsu.edu/coas/mls.html). This training program has

resulted in a much broader base of knowledge in assistive technology, which has lead to improved services and outcomes for our citizens with disabilities throughout the state.

Indiana (State Director: Robert Marra, Project Coordinators: Shirley Amond, Vicki Hershman)

PATINS is an Indiana Department of Education, Division of Special Education, assistive technology initiative designed to provide statewide systems change by providing training, resources and technical assistance to local education agencies throughout Indiana. The project's activities are provided through its five regional operational centers. In October of 1995, PATINS joined the Research Institute for Assistive and Training Technologies' (RIATT) Partnership of States. Based on the need to provide a wide range of training opportunities to service providers in Indiana's public schools, PATINS began delivery of the RIATT Accessible Learning Materials in August of 1996. At the end of the first year, the project entered into an agreement with RIATT@NASDSE for continuing the delivery of the RIATT materials and course work for professional development and continuing renewal units. During the first two years of the PATINS/RIATT Accessible Learning Program, a total of 15 courses were provided to 971 service providers. The strengths of the program include regional access to training programs, self-paced study, multi-media learning opportunities and networking opportunities for participants. The State of Indiana continues to be committed to the development and provision of competency based training opportunities for public school professionals.

Maine State Coordinator: David Stockford , Project Directors, Kathy Fries, Kathy Powers)

Maine's plan for increasing skills and competencies in assistive technology is multifaceted and directed toward helping educators and other professionals understand the role assistive technology plays in helping all students achieve the high standards outlined in Maine's Learning Results. One important resource in this effort is the RIATT@NASDSE program. A two step strategy for using this resource is currently being implemented through a Maine Department of Education and University of Maine System partnership that is outlined below.

In an effort to increase the University's personnel preparation program's capacity to increase awareness of assistive technology among professionals, six awareness modules, using the RIATT@NASDSE courses, were incorporated into the University's standard offerings during 1997 and 1998. Close collaboration between the staff of Department of Education, Special Services, Maine's Tech Act Project (MaineCITE) and the University of Southern Maine is a key reason for the initiative's success. The second development stage is built into Maine's Statewide Improvement Plan. It expands to 100 the number of participants that will be enrolled in this distance learning professional development activity over the next two years.

Ohio (State Director: John Herner, Project Coordinator: Susan Wilson):

The Ohio Assistive Technology Distance Learning project received a substantial grant from the Ohio Office of Information, Learning and Technology Services to implement a statewide program. Our accomplishments have been many and a summation of the evaluation data is being compiled. Ohio delivers the RIATT@NASDSE professional development courses in assistive technology through Bowling Green University (approximately 700 credit hours to date) to district AT teams throughout the state. Participants have noted numerous examples of positive impact on students with disabilities as a result of their involvement in the project. All of the partners in this grant are extremely committed and have put forth great effort to ensure its success. We are thrilled with the achievements made on behalf of our students with assistive technology needs!!!

Idaho (State Director: Nolene Weaver, Project Coordinator: Jane Brennen)

The State of Idaho is in its third year of a statewide training initiative in assistive technology utilizing the RIATT@NASDSE distance education program. In addition to providing

training, this project fosters linkages for school district personnel with the state's 5 assistive tech resource centers as well as with vocational rehabilitation. The number of district teams participating in this program continues to grow each year, with the total currently at nineteen. As a result, approximately 46% of the student population has direct ac ess to teams trained in assistive technology.

Alabama (State Director: Mabrey Whetstone, Project Coordinator: Crystal Richardson)

In December, 1998, the Alabama Department of Education, Special Education Services recruited personnel from local education agencies and universities to participate in a statewide training program using the RIATT@NASDSE distance education courses. Over 100 individuals across the entire state have enrolled thus far. Individuals who met the January deadline have received their training kits, and have begun their training under RIATT@NASDSE's "turnkey" plan. The State Department of Education, Special Education Services is pleased with the response and plans on accepting additional applications.

New Mexico (State Director: Robert Pasternack, Project Coordinator: Gary Adamson)

New Mexico was one of the first states to utilize the RIATT@NASDSE materials on a statewide basis. School districts throughout the state provided support (equipment and funding) for their professionals to participate in the statewide delivery of training in the assessment, use and implementation of assistive technology services to children in both regular and special education. To date, over 90 professionals from across the state have been trained, placing an A.T. Specialist within 50 miles of every special education child in the state.

New York (State Director: Lawrence Gloeckler, Project Coordinator, Fred DeMay)

The New York State Education Department is initiating a two-phase approach to utilize the RIATT@NASDSE Assistive Technology Training Program. In Phase I, approximately 100 training specialists from the State's Special Education Training and Resource Center network sites (42) will participate in a "general awareness" module. These specialists will then provide inservice awareness in their areas. The intent is to ensure that persons knowledgeable about assistive technology are available in all areas of the State. They can then help school personnel and parents understand the importance and value of assistive technology. The training specialists will also be prepared to direct school personnel to other expert resources within the State.

In phase 2, regional teams will be established to participate in the full range of courses available through RIATT@NASDSE. The intent is to establish and maintain regional expertise, which will then be available directly to districts and providers. Regional teams area expected to work directly with local Committees on Special Education (CSE's) to provide guidance and training on evaluation and recommendation associated with the IEP process as it relates to assistive technology.

In addition to those states currently implementing statewide training plans, there are other states who are at the design stages of a plan that would most compliment their system. These include Virginia, Mississippi, West Virginia, California, and North Carolina and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The acquisition of hard-to-find training in rural areas continues to be a challenge to professional development leaders across the country. The RIATT@NASDSE distance education program has proven to be an effective model for the delivery of assistive technology training to a large number of professionals at a minimal cost. Using the RIATT@NASDSE program, many states have realized the benefits of increased availability of training to rural-based professionals, reduced travel for participants and trainers, increased professional participation and communication, and greater coordination of services across the state. Only through the systemic use of such cutting-edge distance education programs can rural districts hope to provide the training and support their professionals need the most.